

**Further Evaluation of Early Start  
Progress Report**

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# 1 Introduction

Early Start, with which this report is concerned, is a preschool intervention for educationally disadvantaged children in 40 locations. Launched by the Department of Education and Science in 1994, it is one element of a multifaceted Government strategy for tackling disadvantage. Before looking at Early Start and its evaluation, it may be useful to describe a previous example of a preschool intervention for disadvantaged children and then to try to place Early Start in the context of the wider strategy for disadvantage.

## **Background and context**

Early Start is at least partially modelled on one of the earliest attempts to take action on the issue of disadvantage: the Rutland Preschool Project (Holland, 1979; Kellaghan, 1977; Kellaghan & Greaney, 1993). This initiative had two main aims. First, it sought to provide children in a preschool setting with experiences that would facilitate the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes appropriate to later school success. Secondly, it sought to increase the involvement of parents in the education of their own children. An evaluation of the initiative (Kellaghan, 1977) indicated some success in relation to these two aims. First, the average measured intelligence of participating children increased over the two years of the preschool programme. Secondly, data collected from the parents of participating children showed that there had been some change in their school-related behaviour.

Despite the increased measured intelligence and the changed parental behaviour, however, the achievement in school of the children three years after they had left the preschool was no better than that of a control group of children who had not attended the preschool.

A follow-up of participants in the preschool programme and of the original control group (Kellaghan & Greaney, 1993) indicated that the preschool programme

seemed to have some long term benefits insofar as participants were significantly more likely to obtain formal educational qualifications than the control group. The findings of evaluations of the Rutland Street Project (initial benefits that appear to wash out in the early years of formal schooling only to re-emerge in adulthood) are similar to findings of evaluations of preschool interventions in other countries in the 1960s and 1970s (see, for example, reviews by Bronfenbrenner (1975) and Lazar and Darlington (1982)). In more recent reviews, there is a growing consensus that the benefits of early childhood education vary depending on the nature of the target group and the intensity and duration of the programme (Kagitcibasi, Sunar, & Bekman, 2001). Barnett (2001) concludes from his review of research on American preschool education that the greatest long-term cognitive and academic gains, including large improvements in reading achievement, seem to accrue to disadvantaged children who attend highly intensive educational interventions over a period of years before school entry. These reviews also recognise, however, that the interpretation of findings may be compromised by design problems with the evaluation methodology.

Early Start is one of a number of initiatives that involves discriminating positively in favour of disadvantaged children. It is an example of positive discrimination in the sense that schools serving disadvantaged children are supported in providing an educational experience to three year olds who are disadvantaged that is not provided to other three year olds.

The targeting of educational spending (positive discrimination) was relatively rare, in Ireland, until the 1980s (Archer, 2001; Sheehan, 1982). In 1984, however, the Government began a practice of designating some schools as 'disadvantaged' on the basis of the number of students from families in poverty as assessed by socioeconomic indicators such as unemployment, and possession of a medical card. Additional resources were allocated to these schools, initially, to use as they saw fit. In later years, more focused interventions were introduced to all or some designated schools. Early Start is one of these interventions. Others include the Home-School-Community Liaison scheme, the sanctioning of additional staff to reduce the student-

teacher ratio, Breaking the Cycle, the Support Teacher Project, the 8 to 15-Year Old and Stay in School initiatives to prevent early school leaving and aspects of the New Programme (Giving Children an Even Break by Tackling Disadvantage). Designated schools were also treated more favourably in terms of resources to which all schools are entitled (e.g. capitation grants, remedial teaching and the psychological service).

The designation of schools has been a central part of Government policy to combat disadvantage since 1984. There have, however, been other elements of that policy. These include curriculum innovations, especially at second level to cater for the needs of an ever-increasing range of abilities and interests among students (e.g., Leaving Certificate Applied). They also include the continuation of schemes that target individuals rather than schools (free books, school meals, and the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Scheme). In the third-level education sector, there are schemes of student support for students from low income families and programmes to increase the participation rates of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in third-level education. Finally, outside the formal school system, there is a variety of second chance initiatives for early school leavers (e.g., Youthreach and the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme) and for other adults who did not benefit from their schooling (e.g., the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme). Murphy (2000) provides an overview of initiatives for tackling disadvantage.

More recently, there has been an attempt to develop a complementary approach which focuses on the system, as a whole, and which would result in a change of experience of schooling not just for those students who are disadvantaged, but for all students. This approach is sometimes referred to as systemic change and focuses on what Kellaghan, Weir, Ó hUallacháin and Morgan (1995) call the role that structural problems in the system may be playing in the maintenance, and probably in the creation of disadvantage (p.64). Among the factors identified by Kellaghan et al are the admissions and placement policies and practices of schools and the focus on academic examinations. This approach is evident in the Education Act of 1998 and in the Education (Welfare) Act of 2000. In the 1998 Education Act, disadvantage is

taken to mean the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools (Section 32 (9)). This legislation has also given rise to the establishment of a committee to advise the Minister for Education and Science on policies and strategies to be adopted to identify and correct educational disadvantage (Section 32 (1)). According to a Ministerial press release of February 16, 2001, it appears that this committee will be expected to take systemic factors into account in discharging its advisory function.

Against the background of the strategy, just outlined, the next section of this report will contain a description of the main features of the Early Start initiative, a summary of the two reports of an evaluation of Early Start (Educational Research Centre, 1998; Kelly & Kellaghan, 1999) commissioned by the Department of Education and Science, and an account of some issues that gave rise to a request for further evaluation with which the present progress report is mainly concerned.

### **The Early Start preschool programme**

As part of the integrated approach to problems of disadvantage in designated schools, Early Start was introduced to eight schools in the 1994/95 school year and to a further 32 schools in the following year. Like the Rutland Street Project, the initiative was set up to provide for three year old preschool children.

While the programme is broadly concerned with the development of the whole child, it is primarily an intervention that was designed to promote language and cognitive development and to prevent school failure. Several features, including a number relating to personnel support, that differentiate the programme from provision for the infant classes of primary schools can be identified. First, it may be noted that the school day which consists of a morning or afternoon session is much shorter for Early Start pupils than for infant pupils. Secondly, class size is limited to 15 pupils. A third innovative feature is that each teacher is assisted by a full-time Child Care worker. Fourthly, all schools involved in Early Start have the support of a Home-

School-Community Liaison co-ordinator (though this provision has recently been extended to all primary schools that are designated as disadvantaged) and are in a position to divert the services of the co-ordinator towards the promotion and development of Early Start. Outside of school, a strong emphasis on parent involvement was envisaged from the outset. It was also intended that Early Start would evolve in association with other community-based agencies and individuals involved in dealing with disadvantage at local level.

### **Early Start evaluation**

An evaluation of Early Start in the original group of eight participating schools was undertaken during its first four years of operation (1994-1998) culminating in two evaluation reports (Educational Research Centre, 1998; Kelly & Kellaghan, 1999). All aspects of implementation were examined in the evaluation including enrolment and attendance patterns, the nature and duration of classroom activities, the teacher-Child Care worker relationship, and the extent of parent involvement. Tracking the achievements (cognitive and non-cognitive) of pupils also formed a major part of the evaluation. This task was approached in a number of ways. In the first instance, all pupils who were in second class in the eight participating schools in 1994/95 when Early Start was introduced were tested in reading and mathematics. The reading test was the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test (Level 2, Form A) and the test in mathematics was the Drumcondra Mathematics Test (Level 1, Form B). The results provided a baseline for comparison with the results of the same tests administered in 1998/99 and 1999/2000 in the same eight schools to subsequent cohorts of second class pupils that included Early Start participants. A similar procedure was adopted in relation to junior infant pupils. In this case, however, testing involved a sample of pupils who were assessed in the areas of cognition, language, and motor skills development using the American Guidance Service 'Early Screening Profiles' tests. Subsequent testing of the first two cohorts of Early Start pupils was carried out when they reached junior infants in 1995/96 and 1996/97 along with their classmates who had not participated in the programme, while additional information relating to the

first cohort of Early Start pupils was also obtained in interviews conducted with 17 junior infant teachers.

The evaluation yielded mixed results in relation to the achievement of pupils. According to the teachers who were interviewed, children who had attended Early Start adapted more readily to school than children who had not had that experience. Early Start participants, when they reached junior infants, were judged by their teachers to have higher levels of cognitive and social maturity, to be better adapted to classroom procedures, and to have higher levels of self-determination and independence. However, the test results of the first two cohorts of Early Start pupils in junior infants were not found to differ significantly from those of pupils who had not attended Early Start, though language performance of the second cohort was significantly better than that of the first cohort. The literacy and numeracy assessments involving second class pupils produced similar results. Differences in the achievements of pupils who had attended Early Start and those who had not were not found to be significant.

Though not inconsistent with findings of evaluations of early childhood interventions reported for other countries, the test results of the Early Start evaluation were regarded as disappointing by many of those who had helped to set up and develop the initiative. A review of the findings presented in the second evaluation report (Kelly & Kellaghan, 1999) recognized that the evaluation of pupil outcomes was limited to literacy and numeracy skills as measured by standardised tests. It also suggested that problems with implementation, identified in the first evaluation report (Educational Research Centre, 1998), may have contributed to the failure of Early Start to impact on achievement. In addition to the duration and intensity of the programme which were considered inadequate by international standards, attention was drawn to low attendance rates in some schools, to difficulty in reaching parents, and to problems in the working relationship between teachers and Child Care workers. More fundamentally, perhaps, the report questioned whether there had been sufficient



emphasis on cognitive activities in the Early Start curriculum, while endorsing the reservations of teachers about the adequacy of in-service provision and the absence of curricular guidelines. The report also indicated that there was a need to integrate Early Start in a more co-ordinated approach to dealing with disadvantage. Finally, it raised questions about adult-child interaction in Early Start, noting that research on early intervention programmes showed that 'individual attention/tutoring' produces better results' (Kelly & Kellaghan, 1999, p.14).

Following the evaluation, and in view of teachers' positive judgements about Early Start pupils when they reached junior infants, the Department of Education and Science initiated a series of measures designed to address at least some of the shortcomings of the programme that had been identified during its initial phase of operation. Important developments included additional in-service support involving visits to classrooms and the preparation of a draft curriculum which was disseminated to Early Start providers in 1998. Further evaluation of Early Start was proposed in light of these developments which it was believed had led to a significant improvement in implementation. In support of this view, Department of Education and Science personnel drew attention to very specific changes that had occurred since the earlier evaluation had been conducted. These included an increased emphasis on the quality of adult/child interactions, the specification of behavioural objectives, and the development of assessment profiles (C. Ó Maoláin, personal communication, March 16, 2000).

### **The current evaluation**

Following consultation with the Early Start team and in light of the evaluation findings, a proposal for the further evaluation of Early Start was submitted to the Department of Education and Science in the summer of 2000. In the proposal, it was suggested that the evaluation would proceed on a phased or rolling basis using less resource-intensive methods (school and teacher questionnaires, examination of existing documents, and some further observation of Early Start classes) before

making a decision to invest in further testing (Archer & Lewis, 2000). This was the approach adopted. It was also agreed that the initial focus of the evaluation would be on an investigation of the extent to which change had occurred in relation to specific aspects of the implementation and operation of Early Start, paying particular attention to those aspects identified as problematic in the previous evaluation.

### **An outline of this report**

The remainder of this document contains a progress report of that investigation, drawing primarily on information that was obtained from schools and teachers in 2000/2001 and on project documentation. The sources of information used are: Questionnaires returned from 37 of the 40 schools that are currently involved in Early Start; a set of curricular guidelines that were issued to schools in 1998/1999; teacher preparation notes returned from 22 schools; and questionnaires returned from 16 of the 20 teachers who have been working in Early Start since the beginning.

The following questions are addressed in the report:

- Has there been a significant change in the emphasis placed on different aspects of the curriculum (e.g., is more attention being given to cognitive development through the specification of objectives and activities)?
- Has the quality of support to staff improved over time?
- Has parent involvement increased?
- To what extent is individual attention the focus of adult-child interactions in Early Start classrooms?
- Has there been any improvement in attendance rates in Early Start?
- Have there been any shifts in terms of demand for places in Early Start?

In accordance with the evaluation proposal (Archer & Lewis, 2000), the report also contains material on enrolment practices in participating schools and a

comparison of levels of disadvantage (estimated by Principal Teachers) in Early Start and in other classes in Early Start schools. It is divided into five sections as follows:

Results of analysis of school questionnaire

The Early Start curricular guidelines

Analysis of teacher preparation notes

Results of analysis of teacher questionnaire

Summary and conclusions which includes a discussion on the direction that evaluation of Early Start might now take. For example, consideration will be given to whether the implementation of Early Start has changed sufficiently to justify undertaking a testing programme to monitor the learning of recent cohorts of Early Start pupils.

## **2 Results of Analysis of School Questionnaire**

A questionnaire was sent to the principal of each of the 40 primary schools involved in Early Start in early December 2000. Unless otherwise stated, results of analysis of the questionnaire are based on data supplied by 37 schools – that is, all Early Start schools from which completed questionnaires were returned before March 1, 2001.

### **Background information on Early Start school personnel**

Length of teaching service in Early Start schools of teachers assigned to Early Start in 2000/2001 ranges from one to 36 years. The teachers (52 in all) were initially employed in the schools in most years throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. While as many as seven teachers who taught Early Start in 2000/2001 were appointed in 2000, appointments in two of the schools date from the 1960s.

Approximately two-thirds of the 2000/2001 cohort of Early Start teachers (34 out of 52) first worked on Early Start on or after September 1, 1998 when the Early Start curricular guidelines were distributed to schools. The remainder were engaged sometime during the previous four school years and so would have worked with Early Start pupils before the curricular guidelines were available.

In contrast to the teachers, most of the Child Care workers in Early Start schools began working on Early Start in the four-year period prior to the introduction of the guidelines. Thirty-four of the 51 Child Care workers (information is missing in one case) took up employment in Early Start schools prior to September 1, 1998. Of the remaining 17, four were appointed on that date, five were appointed in 1999, and eight took up employment in 2000.

### **Demand for places**

Information was obtained from schools on a) the number of Early Start places available b) the number of applications for places received and c) the number of

children who began Early Start in September for each year since 1995/1996.

The number of Early Start places in schools that provided information ranges from 1, 530 to 1, 560 between 1996 and the start of the school year 2000/2001 (Table 1). As shown in the table, the number of applicants exceeds the number of places in every year except 1996 when there were fewer applicants than places. In fact, the trend reflects an increasing shortfall in the supply of places relative to demand, amounting to -321 in 2000/2001. In every year under review, however, the number of places taken up is less than the number of places available. Non take-up reached a peak of 103 in 1997, but in the past two years has levelled off to a point where fewer than 50 places were unfilled.

Table 1: Number of Early Start places, applicants and beginners (1996-2001)

Year Ending	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
No. Places	1 530	1 560	1 557	1 530	1 545	1 545
N	36	37	37	37	37	37
No. Applicants	1 277	1 632	1 719	1 747	1 798	1 866
N	34	34	34	35	35	35
No. Beginners	1 476	1 457	1 473	1 438	1 508	1 498
N	36	37	37	37	37	37
(Places – Applicants)	253	- 72	- 162	- 217	- 253	- 321
(Places – Beginners)	54	103	84	92	37	47

### **Recruitment and enrolment of pupils**

Early Start is being implemented in schools at a time when Child Care provision in local communities is perceived to be in a state of flux. In response to a question about changes in provision in the local area, attention was drawn to the huge growth in the demand for Child Care and to the absence of appropriate services at local level to meet the demand. Principals reported both the recent opening of new facilities or

the enlargement of existing ones (14 mentions) (crèches, family centres, day nurseries, and play groups) and the closure of others (7 mentions) (e.g., privately owned crèches). The inability of parents to pay, difficulty in recruiting suitable staff and/or the introduction of statutory regulations on Child Care were cited as reasons for the closures.

Principals in several schools (14 out of 37) indicated that they had not experienced difficulty in attracting participants to Early Start. For those who did report difficulty, the main problem identified relates to the length of Early Start sessions. In eleven schools it was explained that, from a parental point of view, two-and-a-half hours is too short, especially in cases where parents are working. It was mentioned that even parents who are free to do so have difficulty returning to collect their child after the session ends especially if there is an older child to be collected later. Competition from other schools, nurseries, play schools, crèches and preschools including the proximity of other Early Start units was cited by a number of principals (eight in all) as a related problem which served to reduce participation in Early Start. Many of these facilities have longer opening hours and, because of this, are believed to be more attractive to some parents. Lack of transport and distance of the target population from the school were considered to be a problem in two schools, while social problems in families (including parental apathy and lack of motivation) were reported in a further seven schools. Age restrictions (the fact that children might be too young to attend Early Start one year but too old to attend the following year) were mentioned in two cases. Principals in four schools shared the view that there will always be a minority of families that are difficult to reach regardless of the efforts made to do so.

In nearly all schools for which information is complete (34 out of 36), principals reported that a variety of methods are used to advise families of potential Early Start pupils of the existence of the programme. A commonly cited method is contact through health professionals (19 mentions) including public health nurses (ten

mentions), speech therapists (two mentions), social workers (one mention) and Health Boards (six mentions). ‘Word-of-mouth’, though it is not clear who the speakers are, was mentioned eighteen times. Schools also rely to some extent on notices or newsletters to increase community awareness about the programme. These may be circulated with the support of a local church or parish office (12 mentions), posted in public places e.g., local shops, credit unions, post offices, community centres (eleven mentions), or placed in one or more schools in the catchment area (nine mentions).

Families may also be targetted in more direct ways. In one school, for example, enrolment invitations are sent to all potential pupils identified from the parish baptismal register while in another two schools a circular offering places in Early Start is delivered to every house in the catchment area. Principals also reported that parents who already have a child attending the school are contacted by a letter or written note (13 mentions) that may be given to the child to bring home (nine mentions). The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator (12 mentions) is the staff member who tends to be identified as having the task of informing families about the programme. With two exceptions, Early Start teachers or other teachers were not mentioned in this context.

When asked about the strategies used to encourage participation in Early Start by children whose needs are greatest, intervention by the HSCL co-ordinator was mentioned frequently. In most schools (31 out of 37) for which information is complete, it was reported that the HSCL co-ordinator visits the families whose children have been identified as having the greatest needs. A variety of other professionals and agencies are involved to a much lesser extent – public health nurse (eight mentions), social worker (three mentions), speech therapist (one mention), Early Start teacher (one mention), clergy (one mention), Health Board (five mentions), Family Resource Centre (two mentions), and Parents’ Association (one mention). In the case of three schools, it was explained that, because there was no

difficulty in filling places, there was no need to adopt strategies to target the most disadvantaged children.

Principals in more than three-quarters of schools (29) indicated that their Early Start pupils are drawn from the same population as the rest of the school. Early Start pupils are drawn from a larger population than the rest of the school in seven schools and from a smaller population in two schools. In cases where pupils are drawn from a larger population than the rest of the school, principals explained that the catchment area is served by a few schools to which Early Start pupils may subsequently transfer (4), that Early Start is mixed in a single-sex school (1), or that referrals come through the Health Board (1). In the two schools that accept applications from a smaller population than the rest of the school, it was mentioned that unlike mainstream pupils, Early Start applications are considered only from the catchment area or that only disadvantaged children are targeted. In another school, the principal indicated that the target group varies from year to year and may be drawn from either larger or smaller populations than the rest of the school.

In most schools (33), a school enrolment policy has been devised to cover a situation in which there are more applicants than places for Early Start (three principals indicated that there is no such policy while information is missing from one school). Copies of enrolment policies in respect of Early Start were submitted by five schools. Inspection of the five submitted documents reveals detailed information on selection criteria with priority being given to children from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds. In the case of a further 25 schools, descriptions of the enrolment policy were provided. The descriptions also affirm that the main criterion used to screen for selection is disadvantage (15 mentions). Other considerations relating to the presence of siblings at the school (seven mentions), residency within the catchment area (seven mentions), priority to children with special needs (three mentions), age (three mentions), and first come, first served (two mentions) were also cited. In two cases, principals explained that due to the sensitive nature of the selection criteria and out of



respect for parents no written statement of the policy exists though formal selection procedures are in place. Principals in the remaining four schools indicated that an enrolment policy has been devised but did not supply details.

The main criterion used by schools when considering applications for enrolment in Early Start is Level of disadvantage (Table 2). Principals in most schools (31) indicated that this criterion was used A lot. Presence of disability was used to the same extent in two-thirds of schools (20) for which information is complete while principals in more than half the schools (18) indicated that the presence of siblings in the school also counted ‘A lot’ in their enrolment policies. Only a few schools relied much on the ‘First come first served’ criterion, with respondents in as many as 16 schools reporting that this criterion was not used at all. The extent to which pupils are accepted on the basis of ‘Proximity of home to school’ varies with responses fairly evenly distributed across the scale.

Table 2: Number of Schools in which selected enrolment criteria for Early Start were used to varying degrees

	A lot	Some	A little	None	Total
Enrolment Criteria					
Level of disadvantage	31	3			34
Presence of disability	20	6	3	1	30
First come, first served	3	6	8	16	33
Siblings in school	18	8	5	2	33
Proximity of home	8	9	6	9	32

Principals in five schools indicated that admittance to Early Start had been refused for reasons other than those dealt with in the enrolment policy. A variety of reasons were offered for the refusals. In two cases, the applicants were deemed to be underage. In another, the application of the Early Start teacher was turned down.

The teacher concerned had applied to have her child enrolled on the basis of her single-parent status. In a fourth case, it was explained that applications are refused if siblings are attending schools outside the parish. In the fifth case, demand exceeded supply to such an extent in 1999/2000 that 24 children were refused admittance but, unfortunately, the selection criteria were not specified.

### **Levels of disadvantage and disability**

The current evaluation afforded an opportunity to consider the absence of significant differences between Early Start and non-Early Start pupils that emerged from analysis of achievement test results carried out in the previous evaluation. By way of explanation, it could be argued that the absence of differences between the two groups is not entirely surprising, if pupils identified as being disadvantaged or as having a disability are disproportionately represented in Early Start compared to the rest of the school. This possibility was raised in our evaluation proposal (Archer & Lewis, 2000) and principals were asked to compare Early Start pupils with the rest of the school in terms of a) the size of the population from which they were drawn, b) the extent of disadvantage, and c) the numbers with disabilities.

The results of analysis, which include data from two additional questionnaires that were returned after March 1, 2001, do not support the argument outlined, however. For seven of the original eight Early Start schools (information is not available for one school) that participated in the previous evaluation there is no evidence that pupils in Early Start differ from other pupils in the school with regard to disadvantage or disability (Table 3). In fact, principals in three-quarters of all of participating schools confirmed that Early Start pupils are similar to their schoolmates with regard to the criteria in question. While a number of schools recruit Early Start pupils from larger and smaller populations than the rest of the school for reasons already discussed (see 1.3), the clear pattern with regard to disadvantage is that Early Start pupils are no different from the rest of the school. Where differences are reported, schools are almost evenly divided with five reporting greater levels of

disadvantage among Early Start pupils and four schools reporting less. In schools where ‘Early Start children are more disadvantaged’, it was explained that while it is the policy of the school to target the most disadvantaged (e.g., lone parents, long-term unemployed) the policy is only partly successful. This is because the most disadvantaged are unwilling to attend, are poor attenders, and/or are inclined to drop out.

The overall pattern is similar for disability though twice as many schools report that greater numbers of Early Start pupils have disabilities as report fewer disabilities among Early Start pupils. In schools in which ‘More Early Start children have disabilities’, it was explained that children with disabilities (e.g., those with poor language, speech, or social skills) are targetted for Early Start.

Table 3: Number of principals who compared selected characteristics of Early Start pupils with the rest of the school in current Early Start schools ( $N=39$ ) and in original schools ( $N=7$ )

Early Start Schools	Characteristics of Early Start Pupils Compared to Rest of School								
	Size of Catchment Population			Extent of Disadvantage			No. with Disabilities		
	=	>	<	=	>	<	=	>	<
N=39	29	7	2	30	5	4	30	6	3
N=7	5	2		4		3	4	1	2

Code: = (the same); > (greater); < (lesser).

### Attendance

For each of the years, 1995/96, 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99, 1999/00, information was obtained from schools on the average annual percentage attendance of Early Start pupils. In the schools that supplied information, the average annual attendance of

Early Start pupils in the years under review is between 76.7 and 78.9 percent (Table 4). Average attendance improved marginally since 1995/96.

Table 4: Average percentage attendance for Early Start pupils (1996-2000)

Year Ending	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
1996	33	52	95	76.7	9.2
1997	34	66	95	78.4	6.0
1998	34	63	98	77.4	7.8
1999	35	61	98	78.9	6.9
2000	33	63	98	78.4	6.4

For comparative purposes, information was obtained for the same period on the average annual percentage attendance of infant pupils (Junior and Senior Infants combined) in Early Start schools. In the 27 schools which supplied information, average annual percentage attendance of infant pupils is consistently reported to be something in the order of 84 or 85 percent (Table 5). Principals in a minority of schools (varying in number from four to six across years) presented figures that are lower than 80 percent. Comparing the figures in Tables 4 and 5, we may conclude that, for each of the years between 1996 and 2000, attendance rates of infant pupils are higher than those of Early Start pupils, by six or seven percentage points.

Table 5: Average percentage attendance for Infant pupils (1996-2000)

Year Ending	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
1996	27	66	91	84.3	6.3
1997	27	65	92	85.1	5.9
1998	27	67	90	84.2	5.6
1999	27	64	92	84.8	6.3
2000	27	76	91	84.5	4.3

## **Parent involvement**

Principals were enthusiastic about the extent of support for Early Start in the local community, claiming that the initiative is ‘very highly thought of’ as evidenced by the increase in demand for places. Their appraisal of the local reaction appears to be based on feedback from parents who were reported to be ‘very pleased’ and ‘delighted’ with their children’s progress. The one drawback, mentioned in three cases, relates to time-tabling. Early Start is provided during school hours for a morning or afternoon session and so, it was reported, does not suit working parents to the same extent as other preschool or Child Care facilities which open for longer hours.

Affirming the importance of parent involvement in Early Start schools, principals (35) provided copious descriptions of the ways in which parents are encouraged to take part in school-based activities. From this information, it was possible to identify at least four strategies that are commonly used in Early Start schools to involve parents. These include invitations to parents to spend time working directly with children in classrooms (17), to attend courses, classes, and talks for educational and recreational purposes that are initiated mainly by the Home-School-Liaison co-ordinator (16), to take part in running the school’s toy, book, or video library (13), and to become involved in day trips, tours, and after-school activities (11).

Less commonly, parents are asked to take part in ‘shared reading’ at home and/or at school (7). In fewer cases still, parents may be invited to participate in policy development (4), in mother/toddler groups (4), and/or to avail of a parents’ room (3). More conventionally perhaps, links between home and school are fostered through parent/teacher meetings (7) and parents’ associations (6).

While it would seem that a wide range of strategies to encourage parent involvement has been adopted by Early Start schools, frequency of take-up by parents

is another matter. This issue, and the extent of contact between parents and teachers in the Early Start setting, were explored at some length in the questionnaire.

One aspect of parent involvement that was envisaged from the outset of Early Start relates to membership of an advisory group in each school. It would appear, however, that this dimension of Early Start has not yet received much attention from participating schools. In fact, only seven schools reported the existence of an advisory group. Commenting on the number of meetings that had taken place in 1999/2000, principals in two of these schools indicated that the advisory group had met as many as ten times but, in the remaining five, the number of meetings reported for the same period is four or less. Size of membership also varies: the advisory group was reported as having eleven members in one school but between four and seven members in five schools. Early Start teachers (one or two) are members in all cases and in most cases one or two other teachers, including the teacher with responsibility for Home School Community Liaison, are also involved. Additional members listed include Child Care workers (six schools) and principals (three schools), but not parents.

The terms of reference granted to advisory groups are different for each school, though some of the apparent variation may be due to differences in reporting styles. Specific tasks (reviewing applications and enrolment, monitoring transfers to Junior Infants and developing the curriculum) were mentioned in a few cases but mostly the work of the advisory group was described more generally in terms of planning, discussing parent involvement, and formulating policy.

While advisory groups with parent representation have not been established in Early Start schools, a good deal of contact between school personnel and the parents of Early Start pupils was reported, nonetheless. When asked about this issue specifically in the context of the 1999/2000 school year, well over half of those who

responded (21) indicated that there had been 'A lot' of contact between parents and staff. The remainder indicated that there had been 'Some' (9) or 'A little' (6) contact.

Reporting on the proportion of parents of the 1999/2000 cohort of Early Start pupils who had availed of the opportunities afforded by the programme to be involved in the school, principals of seven schools were able to indicate that 'All' parents were involved. In the majority of schools, however, it was reported that 'Most' (16) or 'Some' (12) parents were involved while, in the remaining two schools, only 'A few' parents were involved.

Principals also provided information on the approximate percentage of Early Start pupils (again referring to the 1999/2000 cohort) that had at least one parent who visited the school on one or more occasions for each of the following reasons: to talk to teachers or Child Care workers, to attend talks for parents, to take part in classroom activity, and to help in the day-to-day running of the programme.

In nearly all schools (33), it seems that 90% or more of Early Start parents had visited the school to talk to teachers or Child Care workers. In three additional schools, the percentage of parents who had visited for this purpose was reported to be between 70 and 75 percent. A relatively low turnout (35%) was reported in one case only. Across all schools an average of 95% of parents was estimated to have talked to teachers or Child Care workers during 1999/2000.

When asked about the proportion of Early Start parents who had visited the school to attend talks for parents, principals in half of the schools (18), for which information is complete, reported that 70% or more of parents had attended. An average of 63% of parents was estimated to have attended talks.

Seventy percent or more of Early Start parents were reported to have taken part in classroom activities in more than half of the schools (21). In as many as eight

additional schools, however, the percentage of parents who took part in classroom activities was reported to be below 40 percent. In the six remaining schools, parent involvement was estimated to be somewhere between 40 and 70 percent. Based on the information provided, an overall average of 65% of parents took part in classroom activities.

While information is missing in three cases, the response pattern points to significant variation among schools in the extent to which Early Start parents are reported to have helped in the day-to-day running of the programme. Principals in eight schools indicated that 80% or more of parents were involved in running the programme, but in as many as 12 schools, parent participation was estimated to be 40% or less. In the remaining 15 schools, participation was reported to be greater than 40% but less than 80 percent. Parent involvement in this context averages at 51 percent.

Most principals (35) indicated that they had observed changes with regard to the way parents interact with the school and all of these, with two exceptions, -- one who did not give further details and another who indicated that parents are less involved -- agreed that the observed changes largely reflected improvement. The changes were described mainly in terms of the quality of rapport that had developed between parents and teachers. Parents were perceived to be more confident, friendly, open, supportive, and relaxed. It was further claimed that the school was a less intimidating place for parents because of greater levels of trust which, in turn, were seen to have lead to a more informal relationship between teachers and parents. Principals observed that such improvements were reflected in an increased awareness among parents of educational issues including the value of early intervention and in growing participation by parents in their children's education. The greater co-operation between parents and teachers throughout the primary cycle observed in some schools was perceived to be especially valuable in cases where difficulties arose at a later stage of a child's development.



The perceived positive reaction from parents was backed up by remarks made by some principals who concluded that Early Start provides for successful entry to school and offers an excellent educational experience for all concerned including parents.

### **Perceptions of significant developments in Early Start classrooms**

Principals unanimously agreed that activity in Early Start classrooms had altered ‘A lot’ (21) or to ‘Some’ extent (16) since the programme was first introduced. Change in classroom activity was attributed mainly to the introduction of curricular guidelines (In-career Development Team, 1998.) including the guideline’s greater emphasis on small-group activity, individual-directed-play, and adult-pupil relationships (27 mentions), but also to increased parent involvement (9 mentions), the cumulative benefits of in-service training (6 mentions) and improved staff relations within schools (3 mentions). With the exception of the curricular guidelines, however, there was little elaboration of how the perceived changes were experienced at classroom level.

The introduction of the guidelines, it was suggested, had helped teachers to clarify aims, objectives, and strategies and had provided more structure and focus to the programme. An ‘objectives-led’ approach was now being implemented which principals perceived as different from the ‘theme-’, ‘content-’ or ‘equipment-led’ approaches that had prevailed in the initial phase of Early Start and there was now greater emphasis on language and cognitive development.

While both the curricular guidelines (34) and teacher notes (28) were reported by the majority of principals to have ‘A great deal’ of influence on classroom activity (and are discussed at length in the following sections of this report), it seems that teachers and Child Care workers rely on a variety of additional resources to support and enrich Early Start. In fact, principals in as many as 23 schools reported that ‘other’ resources have ‘A great deal’ (10), ‘Some’ (11), or at least ‘A little’ (2)

influence on classroom activity. Examples cited include material provisions (picture/story books, language development programmes, play packs, books from staff library, and equipment), the teamwork dynamic between teachers and Child Care workers, parent involvement, ideas developed during in-service days, and support from other teachers in the school with experience of Early Start.

### **3 The Early Start Curricular Guidelines**

A draft curriculum document entitled, Early Start pre-school intervention project: Curricular guidelines for good practice, has been available to Early Start providers since 1998 (In-Career Development Team, 1998). The guidelines were produced in the context of on-going in-career development. Some information about the curriculum in the form of detailed worksheets had already been distributed to teachers during in-career days, for example in 1996 and 1997. This material was incorporated into the guidelines and additional worksheets were disseminated in 1999 and 2000. So, while Early Start has been in operation since 1995, the curriculum is still being written and developed. The in-career development team who devised the programme and produced the guidelines describe their contributions as ‘work that is in progress’ which ‘may be redefined in the light of research and practise’ (p.7).

#### **Description of contents**

The guidelines, presented in four parts or sections in a document of 120 pages, have both a practical and theoretical emphasis. In the introduction, the general scope and principles of Early Start are outlined. The approach advocated is one that embraces a structured, child-centred, play-oriented, self-directed learning experience in which adult-child interaction including parent involvement is seen as central. Part two – most of the first half of the document – is concerned with the identification of learning outcomes (which teachers more frequently refer to as objectives) for each of the four main elements of the curriculum: cognitive development, language development, personal emotional and social development, and creative and aesthetic development. Elaboration of the objectives is supported by extracts from the literature in education and child development (including works by Piaget and Vygotsky) and is illustrated by transcripts of adult-child interaction supplied by Early Start teachers. Much is made of the importance of play, the ‘core mediator of the developmental curriculum’, which receives about the same amount of coverage as

the curricular domains (pp.12-18) and which is in fact treated as an aspect of the curriculum rather than as a curriculum methodology. Part three of the guidelines discusses the principles of good practice. It deals with assessment and record keeping, adult-child interaction with particular reference to small-group activity, the teacher-childcare worker relationship, and parent and community partnership. The fourth and final part consists of several appendices: a series of developmental assessment profiles (made up of multiple statements relating to children's progress in preliminary and end of year contexts) for each of the curricular areas (excluding creative and aesthetic development), a set of exemplars for planning small group activity, and lists of educational resources. The latter contains references to books, equipment and materials and focuses mainly on personal, emotional, and social development, multiculturalism, and music.

### **Main elements of the conceptual framework**

The rudiments of a conceptual framework are laid down in the exemplars relating to small group activity (pp.101-108). Key concepts are 'learning outcomes' (specific tasks to be mastered by the child), 'contexts' (grouping arrangements and materials to be used) 'strategies' (types of adult-directed activity) and 'structure' (the time, specific interaction, and follow-up learning specifications for each activity). Reference is also made to the 'interactive style' of adults (e.g., provoking, questioning, seeking clarification). The framework is one which teachers are encouraged to extend and adapt (p.7), presumably in accordance with their circumstances (e.g., the nature of pupil intake, school and personnel resources) and time-tabling preferences.

## 4 Analysis of Teacher Preparation Notes

Since the previous evaluation was conducted, Early Start teachers have had an opportunity to benefit from increased in-career provision. In addition to a number of in-career days that were provided at the beginning of each school year, though not for all teachers in 2000/2001, the programme has been supported by the release of three experienced teachers who were trained to assist and advise newly assigned Early Start teachers. A further recent development referred to in the previous section relates to the introduction of the curricular guidelines (In-Career Development Team, 1998). In fact, the guidelines are regarded – by both principals (see Section 1) and experienced Early Start personnel (see Section 4) – as the most significant development that has occurred within Early Start since the previous evaluation was undertaken. Thus, in the current evaluation, it was considered important to examine the implementation of Early Start with reference to the guidelines. One way of doing this was to ask principals for a copy of the notes teachers prepared for a typical day or week of Early Start activity in the current school year. Submissions, of varied length, detail, and layout, were received from 22 schools as part of their response to *A Questionnaire for Early Start Schools* which was sent to schools in December 2000.

Before reviewing the content of the submissions, it may be helpful to know something about the importance teachers attach to their notes as planning aids. In the teacher questionnaire analysed in Section 4 of this report, Early Start teachers expressed the view that their notes give direction and focus and enable the work to be correctly paced. Further, practically all of them indicated that their notes reflect practice ‘a lot’. This does not mean, however, that an analysis of lesson plans permits conclusions to be drawn about what actually happens in Early Start classrooms, a view that would be shared by teachers. Indeed, as one Early Start teacher explained rather impressively, ‘the notes are a combination of aspiration and

of reality' and, as others confirmed, may be adjusted according to the levels of progress observed in pupils.

### **Application of the conceptual framework**

Apart from this limitation, the material submitted does provide some indication of the range of activities engaged in, of how teachers are thinking when planning their work and of the extent to which the guidelines for good practice are reflected in their preparations. Indeed, inspection of the notes confirms that the guidelines are important in teachers' preparations for Early Start. At least in the submissions received, there is evidence that most teachers are using the conceptual framework contained in the guidelines to organise their planning around activities and themes within the language, cognitive, and personal, emotional and social domains of the curriculum. It should be noted, however, that the extent to which this happens varies considerably. In all, ten teachers referred to the terms 'learning outcomes', 'contexts', and 'strategies'; three of these also referred to the term 'specific interaction'. Another four teachers referred to both objectives and contexts while a further six mentioned objectives but not contexts or strategies (Table 6).

The fact that teachers have organised their notes with reference to the conceptual framework in the guidelines does not mean that the framework has been well understood in every case. While some teachers showed a very comprehensive grasp of the key concepts, others revealed a poor understanding, for example, by confounding strategies with contexts or by providing only a list of activities. On the whole, teachers displayed most clarity in relation to the objectives dimension of the framework which, as shown in Table 6, was also used more frequently than contexts or strategies. Given these observations, it would appear that some further clarification of the conceptual detail of Early Start is called for – particularly if a theoretical understanding of the curriculum is regarded as a central element of teachers' preparation.

Table 6: Key concepts from Early Start guidelines mentioned in teachers' notes

	Objectives	Contexts	Strategies
Teacher			
1	1	1	-
2	1	-	-
3	1	1	1
4	1	1	1
5	1	1	-
6	1	1	1
7	1	1	1
8	1	1	1
9	1	-	-
10	1	1	1
11	1	-	-
12	1	1	-
13	-	-	-
14	1	1	-
15	-	-	-
16	1	-	-
17	1	-	-
18	1	1	1
19	1	1	1
20	1	-	-
21	1	1	1
22	1	1	1
Total	20	14	10

Some of the apparent lack of clarity in teachers' notes may reflect the fact that in the guidelines learning objectives or outcomes are presented for each of the curricular domains whereas the more detailed conceptual elaboration is applied only to the exemplars relating to small group activity (Appendix 8). (Note, however, that Exemplar 4 is designed for whole group activity). Further, it should be noted that the small group exemplars provide mainly for cognitive and language development. The question arises as to whether it is planned to extend the framework to other aspects of the curriculum – creative, aesthetic, social, emotional, and personal — and/or to activities that take place in whole groups, large groups, or on a one-to-one basis. At present, it would appear that, conceptually, small group activity is the most developed part of the curriculum. Yet, it is not clear how much time should be devoted to learning in this context relative to other contexts.

From an evaluation point of view, the variation that exists in the presentation of notes is problematic and, from that perspective, it might be helpful if teachers were encouraged to plan their activities using the concepts of the framework as headings for their notes. Irrespective of evaluation considerations, however, such an approach might help to promote theoretical awareness and understanding. At the very least, it may be worth asking teachers if they would find it beneficial to have the written planning aspect of their work included in the guidelines or in some other form of in-career support.

### **Early Start classroom activities and learning contexts**

An analysis of teachers' notes provides an indication of teachers' concerns when planning classroom activities (Table 7). For instance, there is commitment to a variety of play scenarios in Early Start. Construction/ block activities and role play (socio-dramatic) were mentioned several times. Free play was also mentioned but much less frequently. Second, a mix of grouping arrangements or learning contexts is reflected in teachers' notes with small group activity featuring prominently. The latter is complimented mainly by activities that take place in whole group ('circle



Table 7: Play activities, learning contexts, and curricular domains mentioned in teachers' notes

	Play Activity	Learning Context	Curricular Domain
Teacher			
1	Play	Circle	L/PES
2	Socio-dramatic	Circle, small/large group	L/C/PES
3	Construction	Circle, group, individual	-
4	Block	Circle, small group	L/C/PES
5	Block	Circle, Ratio 4:1; 3:1; 2:1	L/C/PES/CA
6	Role play, sand, water, block	1:1; 3;1; small/large group	L/C/PES
7	Dolls	Circle, 1:1	-
8	Free play, construction	Small/large group	L/C/PES
9	Construction	1:1	L/C/PES
10	Free play	Small group	L/C/PES
11	-	-	L/C/PES
12	Role play	Small group	-
13	Role play, free play	-	L/C/PES
14	Construction	Large/small group +time	L/C/PES
15	Role play	-	L/C
16	-	-	L/C/PES
17	Floor play, dolls	-	-
18	Role play	Circle, small group, individual	L
19	Role play, construction	Exemplar -- group size + time	L/C/PES
20	Role play, sand block	Small group, 1:1	L/C
21	Free play, construction	Circle, small group	L/C/PES
22	Socio-dramatic, play room	Circle, small group, individual	L/C/PES

L: Language; C: Cognitive; PES: Personal, emotional, and social; CA: Creative and aesthetic.

time') or individual contexts though large group activity is also mentioned. Third, most of what teachers include in their notes is presented in terms of three of the four curriculum areas discussed in the guidelines: cognitive development, language development, and personal, emotional, and social development. This is not to suggest that the fourth area, creative and aesthetic development is not a feature of teacher preparation. While play, story, music, movement to music, art and craft are all seen as part of creative and aesthetic development in the guidelines, in their notes, teachers tend to treat each of these areas as separate components. Also, unlike the language and cognitive domains, teachers tend not to link the conceptual framework with these aspects of their work and, for reasons that may be well-founded, there are no assessment profiles for creative and aesthetic development. Some creative and aesthetic aspects (story and music) are included in the language assessment profiles, however.

## 5 Analysis of Teacher Questionnaire

Some of the issues relating to curriculum implementation raised in the previous section were explored more directly with Early Start teachers in a questionnaire that was sent to schools in June 2001. Twenty teachers in 18 schools, who had begun teaching Early Start before the guidelines were issued, each received a copy of *A Questionnaire for Early Start teachers*. The main focus of the questions was to examine the extent to which change in the implementation of Early Start had occurred since the previous evaluation was undertaken. The analysis that follows is based on fifteen questionnaires that were returned at the time of writing. Responses were received from a total of 16 teachers. However, one of the questionnaires was completed jointly by two teachers in the same school and counts as one response in the analysis. Since two of the questionnaires were returned anonymously, it is not clear whether the responses represent the views of teachers in 14 schools or in 15 schools.

### **Change in curriculum emphasis**

To explore changes in implementation, teachers were first asked to compare the emphasis they now place on different aspects of the curriculum with when they first started working on Early Start. Responses suggest that there is currently more emphasis on the cognitive, language and social, emotional, and personal aspects of the curriculum, at least in the opinion of teachers. In contrast, little or no change was reported in relation to creative and aesthetic development or in the sensori-motor domain with a very small number of respondents indicating that there is now less emphasis on these areas (Table 8). (Sensori-motor development features in an earlier evaluation report but not in the guidelines). Thus, it would seem from both the notes prepared by teachers and their responses to the questionnaire that a core curriculum has now been established in Early Start and that what might be regarded as more peripheral elements are being accommodated around this. As one teacher explained, 'Our time is too short and it is a constant struggle to fit in all we want to do. We are

most conscious of the ‘‘Big 3’’ and try to incorporate music, movement and art into activities designed to address cognition and language, and S& P’.

Table 8: Number of teachers who compared current and previous emphasis on aspects of the Early Start curriculum, by curricular domain

	More	Less	The Same	Total
Curricular Domain				
Cognitive	11		4	15
Language	11		4	15
Social, Emotional, Personal	9		6	15
Creative, Aesthetic	3	2	9	14
Sensori-Motor	1	3	10	14

### **Changes in the structure of the learning context**

Teachers’ reactions to a question about how their interaction with Early Start pupils might have changed over time are varied. A frequently expressed view is that Early Start is currently based on more small group activity and individual work. A few teachers noted a greater emphasis on role play while individual teachers referred to the introduction of computer sessions and board games, Montessori motor development activities, and a more structured day with less free play.

Further indications of change in implementation are suggested by information supplied by teachers on the grouping arrangements adopted in Early Start classrooms and specifically on the percentage of time devoted to working in circle (whole group), small group (6 or less) and individual (1:1) contexts. Consistent with the impressions gained from teachers’ notes, the mean percentage is highest for small group activity (41.9). Average percentages are much lower for both whole group activity (28.5) and one-to-one interaction (24.6). The figures for small group activity and one-to-one interaction mask a good deal of variation however (Table 9), while

further inspection of the data indicates that it is the responses of a relatively small number of teachers that account for most of the higher values (Table 10).

Table 9: Average percentage of time allocated to different learning contexts

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Learning Context					
Whole Group	15	10	40	28.5	9.7
Small Group (6 or less)	15	20	63	41.9	16.0
Individual (1:1)	14	10	54	24.6	16.5

Table 10: Percentage of time allocated to different learning contexts, by number of teachers

	20% or Less	40% or Less	More than 40%
Learning Context			
Whole Group	6	15	0
Small Group (6 or less)	3	9	6
Individual (1:1)	8	12	2

Respondents in second column include those in first column

The percentage of time devoted to small group activity ranges from 20 to 63% with as many as nine teachers reporting that they spend 40% or less of their time working in this context. In the case of one-to-one interaction, values range from ten to 54 but, in this case, the responses of eight teachers fall at or below the 20% threshold. In contrast, there would appear to be more similarity between teachers in relation to the proportion of time devoted to whole group activity. Here, the response range is ten to 40 percent.

When asked if they would have answered this question differently five years earlier, most teachers indicated that they would have spent more time (13) on whole group activity and less time (12) on small group activity. There is much less

consensus regarding one-to-one interaction. Some teachers indicated that they would have spent the same (6) or more (3) time working in this context but others (5) seemed to think that the time spent with individual pupils would have been less five years earlier.

### **Profiling and assessment**

In addition to questions about changes in curriculum content and grouping arrangements, teachers were asked to consider whether assessment practices had altered over time. Specifically, they were asked to compare the amount of time they now spend on profiling with when they first started working on Early Start.

Responses are mixed. In eight cases, teachers indicated that they now spend more time on profiling. A further five teachers indicated that they spend less time on profiling while two others indicated that the amount of time they spend on this activity is about the same as before. When asked specifically about whether they found the absence of a recommended profiling system in the creative and aesthetic part of the curriculum to be a problem, teachers responded both negatively and positively. While six of fourteen teachers gave negative indications, the balance of opinion overall seems to indicate that a profiling system in this area would be useful. The need to ensure that new teachers receive adequate training in assessment and profiling was mentioned in a couple of cases.

There is a strong sense from the feedback on assessment that the profiles have evolved (and are still evolving) from a rather lengthy and overly detailed format to one which teachers now find to be more user-friendly albeit still time-consuming. It seems that there is probably some way to go before teachers arrive at a stage where they would describe themselves as being totally at ease with this aspect of their work. In commenting about Early Start assessment, teachers acknowledge their difficulty in coping with the detail, but they also appear to recognise the importance of profiling ('it gives direction') and that considerable progress has already been made ('we now use the profile information more effectively when planning').

### Reactions to the curricular guidelines

Teachers reacted positively to the curricular guidelines. Nearly all of those who completed a questionnaire indicated that Chapter two (The developmental curriculum), Chapter three (Towards good practice), and both the preliminary and end-of-year profiles (Appendices 1-6) are ‘very influential’ in relation to planning for Early Start (Table 11). Chapter one received the same rating from eight respondents with four others rating the introductory chapter as ‘somewhat influential’ and a further three rating it as ‘not very influential’. The reactions of teachers to the exemplars (Appendix 8) and resource lists (Appendices 10-12) are also mixed. In about half of cases, teachers perceived the exemplars and resource lists as being ‘very influential’. In five cases, however, teachers indicated that the exemplars are

Table 11: Number of teachers who rated aspects of the curricular guidelines in terms of influence on planning/preparation for Early Start, by degree of influence

	Very Influential	Somewhat Influential	Not Very Influential	Total
Aspects of the Guidelines				
Chapter 1 (Introduction)	8	4	3	15
Chapter 2 (Developmental Curriculum)	14	1		15
Chapter 3 (Towards Good Practice)	11	3		14
Profiles: Preliminary (Appendices 1-3)	13	2		15
Profiles: End of Year (Appendices 4-6)	12	2	1	15
Exemplars (Appendix 8)	8	5	1	14
Resource Lists (Appendices 10-12)	7	2	5	14

only 'somewhat influential' while a further five of their colleagues assigned the lower rating of 'not very influential' to the resource lists.

### **The teacher-Child Care worker relationship**

The involvement of Child Care workers in Early Start is an important feature of the intervention and one which in a previous evaluation report was shown to be problematic in some cases (Educational Research Centre, 1998). A perceived lack of involvement of some Child Care workers was underlined as a particular difficulty and, by way of resolution, the report called for greater clarification of the roles and expectations of teachers and Child Care workers. Revisiting the issue of teamwork in Early Start classrooms in the current evaluation, teachers were asked to comment on whether there had been any significant changes in the division of work between themselves and Child Care workers in relation to planning/preparation, work in the classroom, and pupil profiling. The clear message from their responses is that Child Care workers are now more involved in planning and preparation and that, more often than not, the level of involvement goes beyond consultation towards responsibility. The division of tasks in the other areas has remained more or less the same according to most teachers. Overall, however, there is a sense of improved relations between teachers and Child Care workers. This is suggested when teachers refer to 'initial difficulty', to the practice of sharing work based on individual strengths, and to an adjustment phase associated with engagement of a new Child Care worker. While Child Care workers have yet to be consulted in the evaluation, it is worth something that all Early Start teachers consider the team aspect of their work to be very satisfactory.

### **In-career development**

A reduction in in-career support for Early Start during 2000/2001 was noted by several teachers as the main change that had occurred in this aspect of the intervention. The fact that, in 2000/2001, in-career development was 'limited to induction' was mentioned with mixed reactions. The absence of in-service days and



of visits to schools, which had been a feature in 1998/99, was perceived to be a problem in some cases, but in others, teachers observed that, as experienced teams, they were satisfied with the amount of support provided. There is general agreement, however, that in-career support is essential for all new personnel. Commenting on the quality of the provision to date, teachers noted the high standard and expressed the view that in-career support had become more focussed and more practical over time. It was suggested that, in future, issues relating to budget management, team management, the legal aspects of Child Care, children's hygiene, and care of equipment should be addressed. More input on art, music and movement (which, so far it seems, have not received much attention) and on profiling was also requested.

### **Parent involvement**

Parent involvement has improved over time according to most teachers. Parents (or the children's minders which include grandparents) are more confident, more often present in classroom activities, and more willing to take part in main school activities (including committees) as a result of their Early Start experiences. For their part, it seems, that teachers, through trial and error, have worked out for themselves how to accommodate and encourage parents. For example, it was noted that in some schools parents are reluctant to attend courses in the school and that the 'rota system' does not work. However, when parents were invited to take part in practical activities with their children or to take on responsibility for something specific such as the toy or book library, teachers were able to report positive results. The need to be innovative in this regard was underlined and, in this context, teachers gave examples of parents' participation in special activity days, in classroom video footage, and in computer sessions with their children. The success of Early Start in contributing to an improvement in parent involvement in the school generally was also noted. Where a deterioration in the involvement of parents was observed (by teachers in four schools), it was attributed, in every case, to an increase in mothers working outside the home.

To the extent that there has been an improvement in parent involvement, teachers attributed the progress that had been made ‘a lot’ to steps taken by themselves and the Child Care worker (Table 12). Opinion on the part played by Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) is divided, with about a third of teachers also giving ‘a lot’ of credit to the HSCL co-ordinator and the remainder giving only ‘some’ or ‘a little’ credit. Further indications of differences in teachers’ views on the Home School Community Liaison service are reflected in very positive comments regarding the efforts of the HSCL co-ordinator in two schools. Teachers generally were less positive about the role of school policy in contributing to parent involvement. Most teachers attributed only ‘some’ (four teachers) or ‘a little’ (four teachers) credit to school policy in this regard. Only one teacher gave school policy ‘a lot’ of credit, while three gave it ‘none’.

Table 12: Number of teachers who attributed improvement in parent involvement to the Early Start teacher and Child Care worker, the HSCL co-ordinator, and school policy

	A lot	Some	A little	None	Total
Parent Involvement Facilitators					
Teacher and Child Care worker	13				13
HSCL Co-ordinator	5	5	3		13
School Policy	1	4	4	3	12

## **6 Summary and Conclusions**

A summary of the findings of our investigation to date is presented in the final section of the report. In our concluding comments, we provide an overview of the progress that has been made in Early Start since the previous evaluation was undertaken while cautioning that the outcomes of our investigation are necessarily inconclusive at this point. The report concludes with an outline of the main tasks envisaged for the next phase of the evaluation.

### **Main findings**

1. There is unanimity in responses to the school questionnaire that what happens in Early Start classrooms has altered since the programme was first introduced. The guidelines are mentioned most often as the reason for change. Principals report that the introduction of the guidelines has helped teachers to clarify aims, objectives, and strategies and has provided more structure and focus to the programme. An ‘objectives-led’ approach is now being implemented which principals regard as different from the ‘theme-’, ‘content-’ or ‘equipment-led’ approaches that had prevailed in the initial phases of Early Start. There is also now greater emphasis on language and cognitive development, according to principals. Increased parent involvement and the effects of in-career development are also mentioned in responses to items in the school questionnaire about significant change.
2. The significance of the guidelines is borne out by the comments of experienced teachers. Although, as seen in Table 11, teachers regard some aspects of the guidelines as more influential than others, all aspects were seen as very influential by at least half of the experienced teachers.
3. The suggestion, in the school questionnaire, that there is now an increased emphasis on cognitive and language development is also borne out by the analysis of the teacher questionnaire, although it is not clear what aspects have been de-emphasised.

4. Greater specification of objectives, as advocated in the guidelines, is evident in our analysis of teacher notes and in the responses of experienced teachers about their preparation and the use of the guidelines in their planning.
5. The fact that teachers have organised their notes with reference to the conceptual framework in the guidelines does not mean that the framework is well understood in every case. There are examples of misunderstandings (e.g., confounding strategies with contexts) and lack of clarity.
6. Profiling, though described by teachers as detailed and time-consuming work, is recognised as a valuable aid to planning and preparation. There is no consistent pattern with regard to changes in the amount of time teachers say they devote to this activity but there is broad agreement that assessment of the creative and aesthetic aspects of the curriculum should be considered.
7. The use of small group contexts is emphasised in the guidelines and the teacher notes indicate that such contexts are well established in Early Start classrooms. Small group work has, according to experienced teachers, become more common and whole class work less common in recent years. The extent to which teachers and Child Care workers engage in one-to-one tuition of pupils is unclear.
8. Reaction to recent in-career development seems to be very positive but some teachers regard some gaps in provision as significant.
9. Principals and teachers clearly believe that there has been major improvement in relation to parent involvement and that the benefits extend beyond Early Start as pupils progress through the school.
10. Parents are more involved in some activities (e.g., talking with teachers or Child Care workers) than in others (e.g., helping in the day-to-day running of the programme).

11. While in most schools, the Home School Community Liaison co-ordinator is involved in contacting families to encourage participation in Early Start, the part played by the co-ordinator in fostering parent involvement varies, according to teachers.
12. Our data suggest that teachers and Child Care workers are collaborating well together and that there has been a considerable improvement in this aspect of the intervention since it was established.
13. There is some evidence of a slight improvement in attendance rates.
14. Early Start classes have lower attendance rates (by 6% to 7%) than infant classes in the same schools.
15. Overall demand for places on Early Start seems to have risen but there is still a significant level of non-take-up of places. What happens to unfilled places is unclear.
16. Several schools reported little or no difficulty in recruiting pupils for Early Start. However, where difficulties were encountered, reasons offered included brevity of Early Start sessions (in a context of competing Child Care providers with longer opening hours) that posed a problem for working parents.
17. Schools vary a lot in their efforts to target pupils 'most in need' at enrolment. Some schools appear not to try at all.
18. No support was found for the hypothesis that Early Start pupils are more disadvantaged than pupils in the rest of the schools and, therefore, more disadvantaged than the control groups in the previous evaluation.
19. Feedback on Early Start from parents and others in the local community is positive, according to principals.

### **Overview of progress**

In conclusion, the findings of our investigation indicate that Early Start is now well established in schools and local communities. A core curriculum, with a strong emphasis on language and cognitive development, is being implemented by teachers and Child Care workers using an ‘objectives-led’ model. The introduction of written guidelines and continuing in-career development are the two main supports that are believed by experienced school personnel to have facilitated an improvement in the implementation of Early Start. Other positive developments include an increase in parent involvement, better working relationships between teachers and Child Care workers, and a shift towards small-group learning contexts. Taken together, these findings suggest that there has been significant change in Early Start classrooms since the previous evaluation was completed.

Our interpretation of the extent to which change has occurred is necessarily cautious, however, for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it is worth keeping in mind that most of the data on which this report is based, derive from secondary sources (the reports of principals and teachers) and, in our opinion, would need to be supported by direct observation in schools. Secondly, our findings may obscure the fact that there are important aspects of the Early Start programme that have not been altered since the previous evaluation. In particular, the duration and intensity of the intervention has remained the same; neither has there been much improvement in attendance rates. Thirdly, even if change has occurred, it is unlikely that all schools have embraced change to the same extent. Our data suggest that there is considerable variation between schools with regard to a range of features of Early Start (e.g., effort made to target families, percentage of time devoted to small-group activity, direct involvement of parents, clarity of teacher preparation notes).

### **Next steps in the evaluation**

In view of these considerations, we believe that to proceed with testing of pupil achievement would be premature at this stage. Instead, our proposal for the remainder of this school year is to focus on direct observation in schools

incorporating interviews with staff. A review of literature indicates that there are now several research instruments, recently developed and/or revised, which have been designed to assess the quality of activities and curriculum in early childhood education and care programmes (Essa and Burnham, 2001). One such instrument, a revised edition of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998), has been widely used and appears suitable, with some modification, for observation of Early Start classrooms. Work is currently underway to adapt the scale, by including some additional items and excluding others in light of the Early Start guidelines. When complete, the intention is to use the instrument in Early Start classrooms, an important objective of this exercise being to facilitate identification of examples of 'good' and 'bad' practice. The results of these observations, along with our findings presented in this report, will provide the basis for answering the question posed earlier about 'whether the implementation of Early Start has changed sufficiently to justify undertaking a testing programme to monitor the learning of recent cohorts of Early Start pupils' (p.9).

Finally, there is need for further consideration of pupil outcomes. While we cannot be definitive, thus far, about the extent to which achievement outcomes of Early Start might have altered since the previous evaluation, it would be wise in our view to begin to explore how an examination of learning outcomes could be conducted. In the first instance, this would involve the choice of an appropriate control group. Although it would be possible to continue to use the original control group (pupils in Early Start schools in 1994/1995 when Early Start was introduced), this would not be entirely satisfactory because of the passage of time and because testing would be confined to eight schools. One possibility, in this regard, would be an examination of the results of the recent Survey of Disadvantage in Primary Schools with a view to identifying schools not involved in Early Start but with similar socioeconomic profiles to Early Start schools. In relation to future examination of pupil outcomes, we would need to give some thought to how we might acquire or produce appropriate tests. In addition to, or, instead of the tests used in the previous evaluation, it may be possible to adapt what are sometimes

referred to as ‘alternative’ or ‘authentic’ instruments, in consultation with Early Start personnel. Gardner’s (1992) American Project Spectrum in which several measures of cognitive development are recommended or Carr’s (2001) early childhood work in New Zealand which attempts to assess degrees of learning dispositions among ‘nearly-school-age’ children could be examined in this context (see also, Johnston & Rogers, 2001; Salinger, 2001). While it is important to take account of these developments, it should be noted that classroom-based assessment systems tend to be demanding in terms of training, cost, and time. On the other hand, some work in this area is already underway in Ireland including the Early Start profiles (In-career development team, 1998) and Shiel & Murphy’s (2000) oral language, reading, and writing indicators for all grades in primary schools.



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